PUTTING THE 'DIS' TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

John H. Laflin

"No book can get through the number of minute questions which it is possible to ask on any extended subject, or can hit upon the very difficulties which are severally felt by each [student] in succession. Or again, that no book can convey the special spirit and delicate peculiarities of its subject with that rapidity and certainty which attend on the sympathy of the mind with mind, through the eyes, the look, the accent, and the manner, in casual expressions thrown off at the moment, and the unstudied turns of familiar conversation . . . . The general principles of any study you may learn by books at home; but the detail, the color, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch all these from those in whom it lives already." John Henry Newman, "The Rise and Progress of Universities."

Unfortunately, what Cardinal Newman said of books (or by extension, of distance learning) has been largely ignored by those who aver that distance learning is the future of higher education. Although in a few limited circumstances, distance education can be a reasonable approach to parts of a university degree, it cannot and should not attempt to replace a university education.

If your institution is still planning to rush blindly into distance education, you must first determine your target audience: do you want to teach students on your own campus, or on satellite campuses of your university; do you want to teach advanced high school students in far flung corners of your state; do you want to attract home bound students from your state, your region, the entire world; do you want to provide specialized courses for employees of certain businesses? No matter which group comprises your target audience, the issue now becomes: "How should I market these distance education courses?"

"If you build it, he will come" may have worked for Ray Kinsella in *Field of Dreams*, but it is a poor way to market distance education. You must find a way to draw the target audience to your distance courses. But how? Mass mailings cost money and are generally ineffective (and it seems a kind of oxymoron to market courses that promise electronic wizardry via "snail mail"); advertising your courses with listservs or discussion groups is generally discouraged and may result in your being flamed by others on the list; and posting courses on your school's web pages presupposes that students are anxiously awaiting your course offerings, that they are already technically

Dakota State University
Madison, South Dakota

savvy enough to know that distance ed courses exist and that your school is offering them. All too often the best marketing method is the very low tech "word of mouth," although nowadays the mouth has been extended to include email. One student who has a positive experience in a distant course may tell one or two of his friends, who may enroll in the future, and who may tell one or two of their friends. Slowly, over an extended period of time, enrollment may grow; however it will probably fall far short of administrators' expectations.

Marketing problems aside, let us assume that you have found a viable target audience. Now you must determine what shape your course will take. Many professors still assume that they can simply put their voluminous lecture notes onto the web (using the <pre> tag, naturally) and have students read the assigned texts and the lecture notes. This method is simple to use and while it may work to some degree with advanced students, it is disastrous for undergraduates with little or no prior knowledge of the subject matter. Adding an asynchronous discussion board to these lecture notes is similarly ineffective: a student who doesn't understand a Donne sonnet will have little to contribute to the discussion other than his own confusion; others who may share that confusion will contribute nothing at all.

The truth is that delivering an effective course requires a tremendous amount of work. Even if you have taught the course before, day to day maintenance is daunting, as each semester's class brings its own set of problems and frustrations. Yet how will your school support your efforts with distance courses? Will you be paid extra? Will you have a student assistant? Will you get release time? Will you have free access to the necessary hardware and software to make planning and teaching your course possible?

What kind of technical support will you receive? Adequate technical support makes for a much more enjoyable experience for both the professor and student; yet many smaller schools lack the budgets and the personnel for anything other than a d-i-y approach. For one course that I taught, I had to design the course, code the various web pages, test, purchase and install conferencing software, maintain the course web site, and troubleshoot my own technical problems as they arose. The support that I received from my own campus computing services was, at best, minimal.

Yet adequate technical support is crucial to any distant course: a system crash is like finding your classroom locked! No one can access course materials, no one can contact you via email – everything stops and waits for the system to be brought back on line. When a system crash happens, and it will, what kind of backup plan do you have? Or, even more common than massive system failure, how will you handle a remote student's computer problems? When his system locks up, his email "screws

up," his files are corrupted by a virus, or his hard drive melts down, what will you do? I guarantee that most students will expect you to "do something" to help them.

When and how will you make yourself available to your students? On campus office hours are normally scheduled within the regular operating hours of the university. But how will you accommodate the distant student who does not access the course materials until "after hours?" What about the student who needs an immediate answer to a question as he struggles at a late hour against a deadline? Can you afford to be as callous as the professor who told one of my students, "They don't pay me enough to answer email"?

Distance education can work in limited circumstances, but it is not a panacea for low or stagnant enrollments; it is not generally a cost effective method for delivering courses or programs; and many students simply do not like it. Effective distance education requires a lot of effort and a lot of support. Distance education courses are best delivered to upper division students, preferably graduate students or working professionals who have some knowledge of the subject and the motivation to work with minimal direction. Students must be self motivated and largely self directed to keep pace. For many students, working on their own means working "whenever" which all too often translates as "never." Once they fall behind their only recourse is to withdraw. In some circles, a drop out rate of 50% is expected; anything less than 50% is seen as a success.

To keep students motivated, a successful course should use a combination of technology: web pages; content outlines to guide reading; discussion questions to spur on line discussion; two way video conferencing; asynchronous discussion; and synchronous chat. But to implement these strategies, you must have the full support of your administration, your technical support staff and your colleagues.

So if it is not already too late, perhaps you should carefully consider whether or not venturing into distance education is worth the time, money and effort that need to be invested by faculty, administration and technical support staff. Perhaps your students would be better served if they could learn "the detail, the color, the tone, the air, the life which makes [a subject] live in us, . . . from those in whom it lives already"— on campus, from your teaching faculty.